

Highlander Research and Education Center

The **Highlander Research and Education Center**, formerly known as the **Highlander Folk School**, is a social justice leadership training school and cultural center located in **New Market, Tennessee**. Founded in 1932 by activist **Myles Horton**, educator **Don West**, and Methodist minister **James A. Dombrowski**, it was originally located in the community of **Summerfield** in **Grundy County, Tennessee**, between **Monteagle** and **Tracy City**. It was featured in the 1985 documentary film, *You Got to Move*. Much of the history was documented in the book “Or We’ll All Hang Separately: The Highlander Idea” by **Thomas Bledsoe**.

Highlander provided training and education for the labor movement in **Appalachia** and throughout the **Southern United States**. During the 1950s, it played a critical role in the **American Civil Rights Movement**. It trained civil rights leader **Rosa Parks** prior to her historic role in the **Montgomery Bus Boycott**, as well as providing training for many other movement activists, including members of the **Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)**, **Septima Clark**, **Anne Braden**, **Martin Luther King, Jr.**, **James Bevel**, **Hollis Watkins**, **Bernard Lafayette**, **Ralph Abernathy** and **John Lewis** in the mid-and-late 1950s. Backlash against the school’s involvement with the Civil Rights Movement led to the school’s closure by the state of Tennessee in 1961. It reorganized and moved to **Knoxville, Tennessee**, where it reopened, later becoming the **Highlander Research and Education Center**.

1 History

1.1 Early years

The **Highlander Folk School** was originally established in **Grundy County, Tennessee**, on land donated for this purpose by educator **Lilian Wyckoff Johnson**. When Highlander was founded in 1932, the United States was in the midst of the **Great Depression**. Workers in all parts of the country were met with major resistance by employers when they tried to organize **labor unions**, especially in the South. Against that backdrop, Horton, West and Dombrowski created the **Highlander School** “to provide an educational center in the South for the training of rural and industrial leaders, and for the conservation and enrichment of the indigenous cultural values of the mountains.” Horton was influenced by observing **rural adult education schools** in **Denmark** started in the 19th century by Danish

Lutheran Bishop **N. F. S. Grundtvig**.^[1] During the 1930s and 1940s, the school’s main focus was labor education and the training of labor organizers.

1.2 Civil rights

In the 1950s, Highlander turned its energies to the rising issues of **civil rights** and **desegregation**. In addition to Myles Horton and others, a key figure during this period was **John Beauchamp Thompson**, a minister and educator who became one of the principal fund-raisers and speakers for the school. Highlander worked with **Esau Jenkins** of **Johns Island** to develop a literacy program for Blacks who were prevented from registering to vote by literacy requirements. The **Citizenship Education Schools** coordinated by **Septima Clark** with assistance from **Bernice Robinson** spread widely throughout the South and helped thousands of Blacks register to vote. Later, the program was transferred to the **Southern Christian Leadership Conference**, because the state of Tennessee was threatening to close the school.

The civil rights anthem, “**We Shall Overcome**”, was adapted from a **gospel** song, by Highlander music director **Zilphia Horton**, wife of Myles Horton, from the singing of striking tobacco factory workers in South Carolina in 1946. Shortly afterward, it was published by **folksinger Pete Seeger** in the **People’s Songs** bulletin. It was revived at Highlander by **Guy Carawan**, who succeeded **Zilphia Horton** as Highlander’s music director in 1959. **Guy Carawan** taught the song to **SNCC** at their first convening at **Shaw University**. The song has since spread and become one of the most recognizable movement songs in the world.

1.3 Backlash

In reaction to the school’s work, during the late 1950s, Southern newspapers attacked Highlander for supposedly creating racial strife. In 1957, the **Georgia Commission on Education** published a pamphlet titled “**Highlander Folk School: Communist Training School, Monteagle, Tennessee**”.^[2] A controversial photograph of **Martin Luther King** and writer, trade union organizer, civil rights activist and co-founder of the **Highlander School** **Donald Lee West**, was published. According to information obtained by the **Federal Bureau of Investigation**, West was the **District Director** of the **Communist Party** in **North Carolina**,^[3] though West denied he had ever been a mem-

ber of the Communist Party.^[4] In 1961, the state of Tennessee revoked Highlander's charter, and confiscated and auctioned the school's land and property.^[5] According to Septima Clark's autobiography, *Echo In My Soul* (page 225), the Highlander Folk School was closed, because it engaged in commercial activities in violation its charter . The Highlander Folk School was chartered by the State of Tennessee as a non-profit corporation without stockholders or owners. Once the State revoked its charter, no one could make a legal claim on any of the property. In 1961, the Highlander staff reincorporated as the Highlander Research and Education Center and moved to **Knoxville**. In 1971, it relocated to **New Market, Tennessee**.

1.4 Appalachian issues

In the 1960s and 1970s, Highlander focused on worker health and safety in the coalfields of **Appalachia**. Its leaders played a role in the emergence of the region's **environmental justice** movement. It helped start the Southern Appalachian Leadership Training (SALT) program, and coordinated a survey of land ownership in Appalachia. In the 1980s and 1990s, Highlander broadened their base into broader regional, national, and international **environmentalism**; **struggles** against the negative effects of **globalization**; grassroots leadership development in under-resourced communities. Beginning in the 1990s, became involved in **LGBT** issues, both in the U.S. and internationally.

2 Since 2000

Current focuses of Highlander include issues of **democratic participation** and **economic justice**, with a particular focus on youth, immigrants to the U.S. from Latin America, **African Americans**, **LGBT**, and poor white people.

In 2014, the Tennessee Preservation Trust placed the original Grundy County school building on its list of the ten most "endangered" historic sites in Tennessee.^[6]

3 Directors

The directors of Highlander have been:

- **Myles Horton**, 1932–1969
- Frank T. Adams, 1970–1973
- Mike Clark, 1973–1978
- Helen Matthews Lewis, 1978–79 (acting)
- Mike Clark, 1979–1984
- Hubert E. Sapp, 1984–1993

- **John Gaventa**, 1993–1996
- Jim Sessions, 1996–1999
- **Suzanne Pharr**, 1999–2003
- Mónica Hernández and Tami Newman, interim co-directors 2004–2005
- Pam McMichael, interim director, 2005; director from 2006

4 Tennessee Historical Commission Marker

A Tennessee Historical Commission Marker is present near the original location of the Highlander Folk School outside of **Monteagle, Tennessee**. The text of the marker reads:

5 Photo gallery

- Historical Marker Back
- Historical Marker Back
- Highlander Folk School Library Panoramic in 2014. Monteagle, Tennessee

6 See also

- **May Justus**
- Rand School of Social Science (1906)
- Work People's College (1907)
- Appalshop (1969)
- Brookwood Labor College (1921)
- New York Workers School (1923):
 - New Workers School (1929)
 - Jefferson School of Social Science (1944)
- Highlander Research and Education Center (formerly Highlander Folk School) (1932)
- **San Francisco Workers' School** (1934)
 - **California Labor School** (formerly Tom Mooney Labor School) (1942)
- Continuing education
- Los Angeles People's Education Center^[7]

7 Notes

- [1] Donald N. Roberson, Jr., 2002, *The Seeds of Social Change from Denmark*
- [2] "Labor Day Weekend at Communist Training School," broadside published by Georgia Commission on Education, 1957, Series I., Subseries A, S. Ernest Vandiver collection, Richard B. Russell Library for Political Research and Studies, University of Georgia, Athens, as presented in the Digital Library of Georgia.
- [3] Federal Bureau of Investigation, Highlander Folk School
- [4] Interview with Don West, January 22, 1975. Interview E-0016. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007), Documenting the American South (DocSouth), University Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Jacquelyn Hall and Ray Faherty, interviewers.
- [5] John M. Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School*, The University Press of Kentucky, 1988, pp. 184–209.
- [6] "Nashville — all of it — named to 'endangered' list". *Tennessean.com*. October 29, 2014. Retrieved August 2, 2015.
- [7] "Re: Workmen's Educational Association - San Francisco". H-LABOR@H-NET.MSU.EDU. 26 July 2000. Retrieved 7 February 2016.

8 References

- John M. Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School, 1932-1962*. The University Press of Kentucky, 1988. ISBN 0-8131-1617-1
- Federal Bureau of Investigation *Highlander Folk School* files obtained under the Freedom of Information Act
- Frank Adams, with Myles Horton, *Unearthing Seeds of Fire: The Idea of Highlander*. John F. Blair: 1975. ISBN 0-89587-019-3
- Jeff Biggers, "The United States of Appalachia: How Southern Mountaineers Brought Independence, Culture and Enlightenment to America". Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker and Hoard. ISBN ISBN 1-59376-151-1 ISBN 978-1593761516
- Myles Horton, with Herbert and Judith Kohl, *The Long Haul: An Autobiography*. Teachers College Press: 1997. ISBN 0-8077-3700-3
- Myles Horton and Paulo Friere, *We Make the Road by Walking*. Temple University Press: 1990. ISBN 0-87722-775-6
- History - 1930-1953: Beginnings & The Labor Years
 - Highlander Folk School
 - Highlander Research and Education Center
 - Pam McMichael, "Dear Friend of Highlander", *Highlander Reports*, April 2005, (PDF)
 - Eliot Wigginton, ed., *Refuse to Stand Silently By: An Oral History of Grass Roots Social Activism in America, 1921-1964*. Doubleday, 1991. ISBN 0-385-17572-8

9 External links

- Official website
- Highlander Research and Education Center Records, 1917-1978 at the Wisconsin Historical Society--Over 350,000 documents and 1800 audio recordings from the Highlander Folk School
- Highlander Research and Education Center Collection, Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
- *"Integrated in All Respects": Ed Friend's Highlander Folk School Film and the Politics of Segregation* in the Digital Library of Georgia
- Myles F. Horton, Tennessee's "Radical Hillbilly": The Highlander Folk School and Education for Social Change in America, the South, and the Volunteer State By James B. Jones, Jr. *Southern History Net* website.
- The Highlander Folk School's FBI files, hosted at the Internet Archive:
 - Part 1
 - Part 2
 - Part 3
 - Part 4
 - Part 5
 - Part 6
 - Part 7
- Highlander Folk School 25th Anniversary, Civil Rights Digital Library.

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